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HISTORY OF FURNITURE PRODUCTION IN MAURITIUS *

by

Laval Koo Sin Lin **

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** Managing Director, Meubles Laval Ltd.

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INTRODUCTION

The French people who settled on the Island some 300 years ago brought with them craftsmen from France and India, later some Chinese craftsmen were brought onto the island. The country with a sub-tropical climate was mostly covered with indigeneous forests comprising some precious species like ebony and makak. Those first inhabitants built their houses and made their own furniture out of timber cut on site. Thus, the art of making furniture was passed on from generation to generation. But it was only early in the twentieth Century that the first mechanical sawmill was introduced, using steampower. The first mechanized joinery and prefabricated timber building factory was built during the boom years after the first World War. At this time, the first mechanized furniture factory also started operation. Both these factories were run with a central steam power plant. The heavy machinery was driven by long flat belts from overhead countershafts. Those two important mechanized units were closed down during the 1930's recession. The industry remained static and stayed at a craft level until after World War II when basic woodworking machines were installed in some larger workshops. From then on, the development of the industry was constant both quantitively and qualitatively. At least one firm started exporting as early as 1962. By 1976, the industry was at its peak with twenty-two units employing more than 20 workers, 20 units employing between 5 - 19 and about 300 units employing less than 5 workers. The total number of employees was around 2000.

The Industry Today

The furniture industry in Mauritius has not been spared by the general recession of the country's economy. Out of the twenty-two larger units operating in 1976, twelve have closed down, among them one of the largest and unique panel furniture units ever set up in the country. The only plant

manufacturing bagasse board has also closed down. The smaller units sector has also been compressed. Today, there remains in operation ten larger units and about 250 smaller ones employing a total of some 1500 workers.

At least five factories are equipped with modern high production woodworking machines and about a hundred of the smaller workshops are now using light electric machines. This increase in mechanization has partly offset the reduction in the labour force and in the number of manufacturing units. It can safely be said that the industry is producing today better quality furniture even in smaller quantities.

Furniture Design

Most of the larger manufacturers are producing their own design according to the demand of local and export markets to the neighbouring island Réunion. However, there is still a long way to go in matter of designing furniture for specific large export markets like the Middle East countries and Australia where competition is severe. To be able to compete on these "open" markets, we should tend to design furniture where our skilled craftsmen could put on a large share of added value on machine made serial produced pieces. The traditional "Compagnie des Indes" designs could serve as basic models. Manufacturers would appreciate UNIDO's aid in the training of Mauritian furniture designers.

Training Problems

Nearly all workers in the industry are trained on the job. Canibet makers, wood machinists, wood carvers, wood turners, upholsterers and finishers still learn their trade from their elders. Practical learning shows quick results but know-how is quite limited without a good theoretical background. There is only one technical school which runs a one year course in basic cabinet making theory and practice. Training facilities should be made available to boys and girls in the following fields: woodworking machinists, machine maintenance and saw doctoring, wood carving, marqueterie cutting, modern upholstery

methods including the use of industrial sewing machines. These are the basic needs of the industry in its drive for export.

Quality Control

Constant quality products of a high standard are currently produced in a few of the larger factories which are already on the export markets.

On the other hand, there is no quality control on the vast majority of furniture sold on the local markets.

The problems are that there is no quality certification (standard) to guide the manufacturers and the consumers. No facilities for mid-management training in furniture quality control do exist.

Marketing of furniture in Mauritius

The production of wooden furniture in Mauritius can be classified roughly in three categories:

(a) Contract furniture - produced for institutions, hotels, government bodies, etc. using often the client's design. No promotion used, other than the firm's reputation for quality and seriousness.

(b) Low cost cheap quality furniture.

(c) High class exclusive design furniture produced in small series.

Contract furnishing, being mostly firm orders from individuals or firms, does not require any sort of marketing. Each project involves a complete study of the furniture ordered a full set of drawings according to the customer's requirements and taste. It is rare that two or more designers or contractors are on competition for a project. We are not concerned with this way of selling furniture.

Low cost cheap quality furniture are made in large quantities by dozens of small artisanal workshops. Some of them are

currently using light basic woodworking machines. Their products are being sold through specialized retail shops in the principal towns of the country. There is little publicity on television. Discounting and promotion sales are the basis of their marketing policy.

The industrial production of high class exclusive design furniture, produced in series or batches, is a new venture for the few manufacturers who are pioneers in this field.

This type of furniture being produced semi-industrially in fairly large quantities has developed the necessity of introducing quality control. Some manufacturers have started exporting their products successfully.

On the other hand, furniture, being a low priority consumer good, has to fight its way among the fantastic array of electric household appliances, electronic Hi-Fi, television and video sets and even cars. Manufacturers are waging a constant battle in order to snatch a larger share of the consumers' household expenditure.

All the above facts put together have created the necessity of undertaking serious market research in this field.

Probably, the best way of marketing for the medium size company is to have a showroom adjacent to its factory where stock is kept and, if possible, a small retailer in town to sell the products. The country being small, there is no place for the travelling salesman or the wholesaler. The customers' habit and possibility of buying direct from the manufacturers' showrooms, which are within 30 minutes drive in all cases, is still the normal practice.

Advertisement on radio and television are becoming increasingly common. Some newspaper advertisements also appear time and again. Printed catalogues and leaflets have just begun to interest the manufacturers. Special local fairs and exhibitions for furniture are still to come.

As far as export is concerned, the introduction of container services has contributed to promote sales overseas. Many small firms ignore their potential in this respect due to lack of information. An export cooperative society which could group the products of its members and deal with all the shipping formalities would be a good thing for the promotion of furniture export.